

## Hell Hath No Fury like a Woman Scorned: Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers

### Introduction

On November 6, 2008 a female suicide bomber detonated herself in North Ossetia, a predominantly Christian area of Georgia, killing 12 people and wounding around 40 others. Some asserted that the Islamic Chechen terrorist organization must be responsible for the killings (Schwartz 2008).<sup>i</sup> No group claimed responsibility for the attack, however, nor was any logical explanation given. This made the act seem like a senseless suicide rather than a possible assault against an enemy. Once the state-centric war between Georgia and Russia over oil and territory had ended, terrorism no longer seemed advantageous to either the Georgian or the Russian cause. Therefore, one wonders what an unknown woman, intent on committing suicide with no obvious partisan motivations, was doing in the middle of two destructive armies.

The presence of female suicide bombers creates disquietude among onlookers, as our perceptions of women more often revolve around humanity and kindness. We view women as the givers of life rather than the takers of it. Female terrorism is also disturbing, given the stereotypes of women as being driven by strong emotions, such as anger, aggression, feminism, or even nationalistic ambitions, even when these emotions have no bearing on a woman's decision to become a suicide bomber. In other words, many judge female terrorists' motivations as neurotic, assuming that Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.

Terrorism has existed for centuries and until recently has been considered a male-dominated form of warfare, where women have been used only in support roles. Today, however, given the misperceptions of women's capacity for inflicting terror, women are no longer serving only as supporters of their male counterparts in sub-state warfare; rather, they are

taking lead roles in attacks with often little assistance from terrorist groups. Women no longer take a backseat to violence and terror; they have tactical advantages to commit suicide attacks, and in a militaristic environment, they are unexpected and therefore surprising perpetrators of murder.

### **Objective of the Study**

This research attempts to assess the motivations of Palestinian female terrorists, hoping to contribute insight into the rise of female suicide terrorism in Israel and, by extension, in Iraq. Media portrayals and often policy initiatives address female suicide bombings as the exception rather than the rule especially in cases related to radical Islam. I argue, however, that due to the deadly impact of female suicide bombings, and the rising number of female participation in terrorism, female and male terrorism is equally deadly. If women are still unanticipated actors in terrorism, a few female suicide bombers may have a stronger impact on civilians than several male terrorists. I strongly believe that the rise of female participation in Palestinian terrorism needs to be addressed. In fact, female terrorism is a security issue that not only threatens Israeli forces, but threatens American military forces in Iraq. These women are still unanticipated perpetrators of terror and yet their participation in suicide attacks has been on the rise. I further argue that the case of Palestinian female terrorism needs to be assessed within the context of Arab/Muslim culture. Given that motivations of women may dramatically differ from those of men, if male oriented counter-terrorism strategies are initiated this may actually serve to exacerbate female terrorism. Thus this research does not generalize all terrorist actions into one motivational cause or cultural influence; nor does it characterize fundamentally non-Western motivations in Western terms. Rather, it analyzes the act of Palestinian female participation in the context of its own social norms and values. In order to approach this research question, I first

analyzed literature on the topic of female involvement in terrorism and then the role of Islamic women in the Palestinian Territories. This gave me a sense of the most common assumptions of female participation in terror, their motivation and socially constructed ideas. In fact, I traveled to Israel to meet with Israeli terrorism experts in order to understand the latest theories involving female terrorism in Israel and Iraq. In doing so, I have developed one neglected explanation for the phenomenon of female suicide bombers.

### **Historical Background of Terrorism**

Terrorism is a vicious part of sub-state warfare, compromising our sense of security and instilling panic. Terrorism is still used today because it has proven itself effective for centuries. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD the Zealots were a Jewish political movement who incited their people to fight against the Roman Empire by way of political stabbings. The most violent group of Zealots were the Sicarii, who were known for killing Jews opposed to their call for war against Rome. Moreover, following the death of the prophet Muhammad, the first duly recorded terror attacks were practiced by a Shiite Islamic sect called Ismailis-Nizari, also known as the *Assassins* (Knight 141, 2005).<sup>ii</sup> In modern times, between 1968 and 2003 there have been more than 6,100 transnational terrorist attacks, causing more than 36,000 deaths and injuries (Nicholas et al. 2003).<sup>iii</sup> Terrorism is an effective political tool of the weak because it threatens human security and instills panic among the masses. Therefore, the objective of sustaining human security for any liberal democracy is difficult, considering that terrorists do not follow the most basic moral and legal norms because they often consider all civilians targets.

In response to this predicament, the United States often looks to other liberal democracies like Israel, a country that has substantial counter-terrorism experience, to create useful policies that can thwart terrorism at home and abroad. U.S policymakers and analysts have much to learn

from Israel as they struggle with the difficulties of terrorism (Byman 2006, 1).<sup>iv</sup> Israel has dealt with constant war since its creation in 1948, when the surrounding Arab countries united to thwart Jewish settlement and statehood. Two armed political uprisings, or intifadas, against Israeli rule were initiated by Palestinian terrorist organizations in the 1990s that employed suicide terrorism and created panic among Israeli citizens. Islamic terrorism in Israel is relentless, lending itself to study by other countries like the United States who are searching for new anti-terrorism policies. Because the perpetrators of suicide bombings are as diverse as the countries from which they come, it is important to analyze the motivations of each person or group, respective to their own cultural influences, so as to not miscategorize terrorist motivations.

Along with many before him, Ariel Merari, a respected Israeli terrorism expert, has attempted to define terrorism. Despite the ambiguities of countless alternative definitions, Merari broadly defines terrorism. Merari's concept of terrorism, in modern usage, is most commonly associated with sub-state guerilla warfare where, "certain kinds of violent actions are carried out by individuals and groups rather than by states, with events which take place in peacetime rather than as part of a conventional war" (Merari 1993, 213).<sup>v</sup> Merari has given a definition to a concept that is commonly misunderstood. In doing so, he still maintains a broad definition of terrorism and does not include important factors including motivations (whether political, social, or personal) and outcomes. More importantly, Merari does not differentiate between criminal attacks and terrorist attacks. For the purposes of this research, in conversation with Dr. Edward Crenshaw, I define the concept of terrorism as the use of lethal violence by clandestine individuals/groups against symbolic targets, usually civilians, in order to induce political

outcomes (via psychological coercion) from a real (and typically much larger and more powerful) population.

Acts of terrorism are not associated with any one culture; terrorist organizations are found on every populated continent, and numerous states are subject to their attacks. The motivations of terrorist groups are rarely the same, nor are the influences that drive them to terror. Thus, one cannot associate the motivations of a group like Al-Qaeda with that of the Tamil Tigers. In his work, Ariel Merari categorizes the different variables that make up terrorism. Indeed, he separates the variables of terrorism into situational factors, the idea of chain suicide, the effect of audience, personality factors, changes over time, perpetrating organizations, age, geographical location, and finally gender. After mentioning gender, Merari notes that in Lebanon during the 1980s, thirty-six people were suicide perpetrators, thirty males and six females. Merari states that the variable of gender needs further study even though, “Undoubtedly, the great majority of the members in the groups under consideration are males. However, because the distribution of members by sex in these groups is unknown, it is impossible to assess “gender proneness” to suicidal terrorism (Reich 1990, 192).<sup>vi</sup>

### **Women in Terrorism**

Traditionally, women have been perceived as victims of violence rather than perpetrators of it.

Figure 1

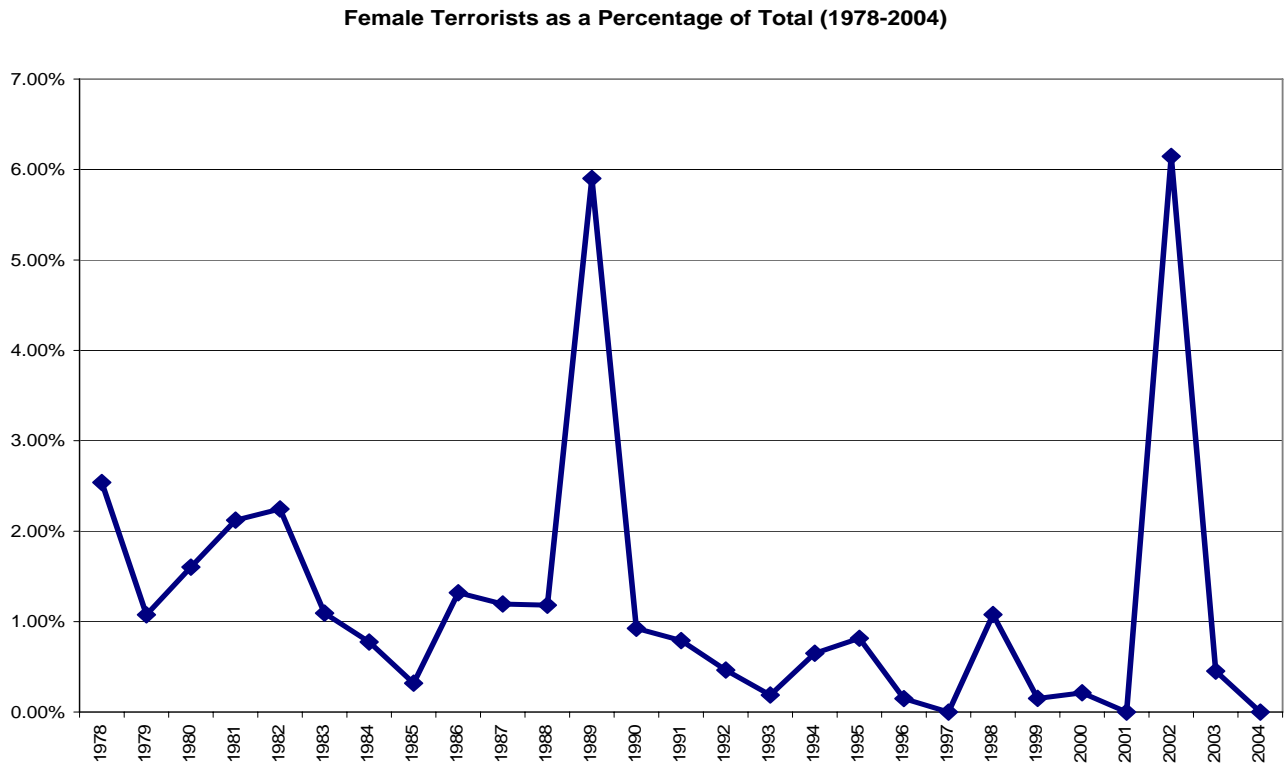


Figure 1 depicts female terrorists as percentage of total terrorists (ITERATE 2004). The cyclical nature of the graph represents campaigns of terror over the last 26 years. The most recent peak between 2001 and 2004 can be most readily associated with the rise of female terrorists in Iraq and other areas. Thus women will be utilized as terrorists if they are available in times of war and political uprising. In fact, since 1985, roughly 34% of terrorist attacks perpetrated in Chechnya, Sri Lanka, Israel and the Occupied Territories, Morocco, Egypt, and Iraq were performed by women (Bloom 2005).<sup>vii</sup> In Israel, between 1985 and 2006, there have been more than 220 female suicide bombers, representing nearly 15% of the overall number of actual suicide bombers in the world, including those intercepted in the final stages of an attack (Schweitzer 2006, 26).<sup>viii</sup> Between 2002 and 2006, 67 Palestinian women were counted as

planning to carry out suicide attacks. Eight of the women blew themselves up. Five of these women were affiliated with the Fatah organization, two with Islamic Jihad in the Palestinian Territories, and one with Hamas. The other women were arrested at various stages of their planned attacks. Of these women, 58% were unmarried, 39% were between the ages of 18-25, 16% were between the ages of 26-35, and 11% were under 18. Almost half of the women were educated; 22% had more than a high school education and only 26% had a high school education and were qualified for non-skilled labor. Others were very young women with no high school education or profession (Schweitzer 2006, 26).<sup>ix</sup> These Palestinian women come from a variety of backgrounds, thus yielding no coherent profile of the female terrorist in the Palestinian Territories.

Trying to understand the motivations of women who commit horrific acts of violence is difficult given our socially constructed idea of female roles and responsibilities in society. Women are viewed as the bearers of life and the moral core of humanity in their roles as mothers, sisters, and daughters. This perception is prevalent in the Western world where female involvement in crime, and especially terrorism, is viewed through the prism of gender stereotypes, which view women as innocent pawns. There is also a tendency to relay this perception to women in the Arab/Muslim world, where they are viewed as hidden and subservient actors in the state and home. In the case of Islam, Western attitudes tend to limit the capacity for thinking outside the realm of preconceived notions rather than accepting other perceptions, especially in the case of women in Islam. Thus, if a Palestinian female suicide bomber commits an attack on the streets of Jerusalem, Western thinkers will raise questions concerning the motivations of this woman and how the use of women as bombers changes the fundamentals of previously male dominated terror organizations. Because there is this idea that

women are marginal actors in the state and home, Westerners may rush to believe that these women were coerced and forced to become suicide bombers, but this is often not the case for the women in Palestinian society. This Arab/Muslim understanding of women is essential to the study of female Palestinian terrorism. Limiting analyses to predetermined notions of Muslim women in traditional roles hampers our capacity to shape explanations for female involvement in terrorism. It is essential, therefore, to emphasize that Muslim women are not marginal actors in the Arab world, and in fact there has been an increase of female participation in political activism related to terrorism.

In Lebanon, some of the first suicide attacks were conducted by women and were organized by the Syrian Socialist National Party. Out of twelve suicide attacks, women were involved in five. In Sri Lanka, the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) is estimated to have 10,000 to 18,000 members, of which, according to the Sri Lankan military, half are women. Women in the LTTE have been active members since its creation by Vellupillai Prabhakaran. Their role in the organization is not marginalized nor is it stigmatized because of their gender. They perform almost as many attacks as men and in some cases are preferred because of their innocent appearance (i.e. their value as counter-profile agents). Women are trained like men, are given weapons, and are taught how to use these arms (Beyler 2003).<sup>x</sup> Founded in Turkey in 1987, the Kurdistan Workers Party opted to use suicide terrorism as their *modus operandi* in 1995 where women participated in all the group's activities. These women were trained to tolerate the same "Spartan lifestyle" as their male counterparts. In fact, the PKK's internal governing rule was one of violence perpetrated by both genders: the more violent one was the higher one's status. Because this group's 20,000 members (consisting of both men and women)



are under-studied, no reliable data is available to conclusively assess the gender component of the PKK (Beyler 2003).<sup>xi</sup>

In Chechnya, the notorious Black Widows have been performing terrorist attacks since June 7, 2000. Khava Barayeva was the first female suicide bomber for the Black Widows. Barayeva, a cousin of a well known Chechen field commander, and Luisa Magomadova drove a truck filled with explosives into the temporary headquarters of an elite OMAN (Russian Special Forces) detachment in the village of Alkhan Yurt in Chechnya. The attack subsequently resulted in two dead and five wounded. Since then, the Black Widows have been responsible for 81% of suicide attacks attributed to the Chechen rebel fighters (Akhmedova and Speckhard 2006, 63).<sup>xii</sup> Women have been participants and followers in many terrorist organizations, including the National Liberation Front of Algeria, the Chechen Black Widows, Tamil Tigers, Weather Underground, and the Palestinian Liberation Organization. The incidence of women committing acts of terror speaks to both the phenomenon of terrorism itself, as well as to our socially constructed assumptions about women (Hoogensen 2005, 119).<sup>xiii</sup> Therefore, the gender component is one of the many crucial dimensions in understanding terrorism. One must study terrorism from the ground up, assessing the factors of *individuals* involved in terrorism, rather than assessing the factors of just terrorist groups.

### **Theories of Palestinian Female involvement in Terror**

After analyzing the opinions that surround Palestinian female involvement in terror, I interviewed four Israeli terrorist experts about the instances of Palestinian female suicide bombers, asking each what really motivates Palestinian women to become suicide bombers. The opinions of these four experts include the most common and controversial opinions involving the

question of gender related suicide terror in the Palestinian Territories. Analyzing the underlying motivations of these women will help provide insight into future attacks in hopes that policymakers can create appropriate counter-terrorism measures to future attacks. Some of the controversial opinions are held by the experts I have interviewed, including Ariel Merari, Raphael Israeli, Yoram Schweitzer, and Mira Tzoreff.

These Israeli experts have studied the phenomenon of terrorism extensively, albeit respective to their academic specialties. Ariel Merari is a seasoned psychologist by trade and a terrorism expert in practice. A professor in the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel-Aviv University, he has compiled both international and domestic terrorist attacks in a list since 1979, which became a computerized database in the early 1980s. The database has grown to include thousands of terrorist attacks and several hundred terrorist organizations. The database is separated into three main categories; terrorist events, terrorist groups, and public attitudes toward terrorism. This database may be one of the most comprehensive terrorism databases in the world, and is constantly being updated with each new terror attack. Although retired, Ariel Merari is still a highly sought after terrorism expert in Israel and all over the world. The day before we met to discuss the subject of Palestinian women in terrorism, a terrorist attack occurred in the city of Jerusalem; an Israeli-Arab stole a bulldozer and plowed through the busy streets of Jerusalem, attempting to kill Jewish Israelis. Israeli newspaper agencies sought out Merari in order to request his opinions only moments after the attack occurred. There is no doubt that Ariel Merari is an experienced terrorism expert with a critical outlook that examines the psychological motivations of terrorists. However, one of my motivations for meeting with him was to ask him why he has never definitively commented on the subject of female participation in terrorism. Indeed, his knowledge of terrorism all over the world is vast, but he has never published any

work concerning Palestinian female suicide bombers. Merari's main concern was statistical; in his opinion, there are too few female terrorists to make statistical analysis reliable. Merari's knowledge of female participation in suicide terrorism both in Israel and abroad is immense, having cited many past attacks perpetrated both in Israel and Iraq by women. However, Merari's primary reasoning for the participation of people in terrorism, regardless of culture or even gender, is primarily psychological, having said that:

Culture and religion in particular seem to be relatively unimportant in the phenomenon of terrorist suicide. Terrorist suicide, like any other suicide, is basically an individual rather than a group phenomenon: it is done by people who wish to die for personal reasons. The terrorist framework simply offers the excuse (rather than the real drive) for doing it and legitimizes it for being carried out in a violent way. There is no evidence to support the notion that influence of a charismatic political or religious leader is in itself sufficient to drive an otherwise non-suicidal person to wish to commit terrorist suicide. However, such influence may conceivably serve as an ancillary factor, boosting an already existing suicidal tendency and channeling it to a certain modus operandi, time, and place. (Merari 1993, 206-207)<sup>xiv</sup>

Merari's explanations are based on the psychological influences that affect the everyday lives of people before they decide to commit an act of suicide terrorism. Yet does his assessment of the individual necessarily apply in the case of women terrorists? There are different motivating factors for men and women. Palestinian women play no central role in terrorist organizations like Fatah, Hamas, or Islamic Jihad. Women are not indoctrinated into these groups like men; rather their status in society is prized for being responsible for producing and caring for children. Women are not subjected to the same propaganda that men are subjected to in Palestinian

society. While it is plausible to say that Palestinian men who have committed suicide attacks must have harbored a tendency toward suicide and that a charismatic leader pushed these men to the point of no return, can the same be said for women of the same society when they are not subject to the same influences? The monetary rewards for women are even lower than that of men, and instead of receiving 72 black-eyed Suras in heaven, women are promised to be reunited with their husband. Indeed, there is no fundamental difference between the earthly and heavenly rewards for women. Women are involved in women's groups that may be political in nature, but under no circumstance does their society compel them to take up an armed resistance against Israelis. Instead, terrorist organizations wish them to indoctrinate their sons to become political militants against Israel. Thus the research of Ariel Merari, although compelling, is missing a vital gender component. There are factors that push men to commit attacks in violent way but what are the aggravating factors that push women?

A psychological component certainly exists in the motivations of Palestinian female suicide bombers, but Raphael Israeli believes that the psychological explanation for female participation is exaggerated. Israeli, an expert on Islamic terrorism, has written on the motivations of both men and women respective to gender. Israeli believes that a suicide attacker is not subject to the same suicidal resolve that Western psychiatry tries to impose. On the contrary, Israeli believes that terrorists are a part of a larger scheme for which they are prepared and trained, together with others who share their convictions, and are equipped by arduous physical and mental training. Along with this explanation, Israeli draws upon the similarities between the Japanese kamikaze and the Islamic martyr, "Muslim fundamentalist self-immolating assassins- who have nothing suicidal about them, come closest to kamikazes in organization, ideology, execution of their attack, posthumous glory, and historical background of self-effacing

loyalty, and culture of shame.” (Israeli 2003, 78)<sup>xv</sup> Thus Israeli adopted the appellation-*Islamikaze*, to describe these terrorists. He applies the same label to women who involve themselves in Islamic martyrdom in the Palestinian Territories. Israeli contends that female participation starts with a Muslim interpretation of honor, and indeed this idea of honor in Muslim society is compelling and deserves examination. Israeli states that the answer to female involvement lies in the Islamic definition of honor:

Arabic distinguishes between male (sharaf) and female honor (‘ird). As in the West, man’s honor is related to the deeds he performs and image he projects. His honor is redeemable if he only applies himself to maintain it, shelter it and retrieve it when lost. The woman’s honor, by contrast, refers to her intimacy, modesty and decency in dress, the preservation of virginity until marriage, gentle behavior and seclusion from male society, which is corrupt by definition. If she should fail in one of those categories, her honor is forever lost (Israeli 2004, 66).<sup>xvi</sup>

The man is thus deemed the protector of a woman’s honor which, if ruined, dishonors her as well as the family. Israeli contends that the lack of parity between the honor of a man and that of a woman leaves men in a dominant role, which women are in a constant struggle to abolish. Israeli primarily believes that Muslim women in the Palestinian Territories are arming themselves as suicide bombers in order to emancipate themselves from the disparity of honor and citizenship within the community. In his work, Israeli asserts that these women listen to the proclamations of religious sheikhs which call women to become suicide bombers. For instance, Sheikh Yassin, the former infamous religious leader of Hamas, decreed a fatwa that rescinded the usage of a chaperone when a woman leaves her home if she was a going to become a martyr. Another religious leader, Sheikh Abu al-Hassan, decreed that the act of Jihad by women against

the Jews was permissible. Israeli describes that in response to these fatwas and the rejection of marginal roles in Palestinian society, Palestinian women become suicide bombers in order to gain equal citizenship and eventually emancipate their fellow woman. Israeli even cites the activism of women like Hanan Ashwari, who attained rank in the cabinet of the Palestinian Authority but is most famous for helping lead the first intifada, and Leila Khaled, who was one of the first female terrorists, having hijacked two airplanes in the late 1970s in order to draw attention to the Palestinian people as two of these female emancipators (Israeli 2004, 66).<sup>xvii</sup> During our conversations, Raphael Israeli and I discussed the role of these women in Islam. He was absolutely certain that these women were not only emancipating themselves by becoming suicide bombers, but were doing so intentionally. I told him the stories of some of these bombers who have been dishonored in their community and were even subject to honor killings if they did not redeem themselves by committing suicide attacks, but he remained certain that these women are actually Western-style feminists.

This approach to analyzing female participation in terrorism could be true in other parts of the world where women prize more Western ideas of freedom, but this is not likely to be true in the Palestinian Territories. Israeli references women like Leila Khaled and Hanan Ashwari as women that have taken substantial strides for feminism in the Muslim world and that their endeavors are feminist. The actions of Ashwari were not violent in nature, and Khaled was a terrorist and a Palestinian patriot with no intentions of suicide or murder. Leila Khaled was a Marxist and, along with her compatriots, hijacked a TWA flight heading for Tel-Aviv. Khaled did not intend to commit suicide and blow the plane up nor were her intentions to hurt any passengers, but rather to redirect the plane to an Arab country where it would be blown up to cause a media sensation. She was later involved in more hijackings, which led to her capture.

Khaled did inflict terror on the passengers that she hijacked, but she never intended to kill. Indeed, Khaled was a terrorist, activist, and maybe a feminist, but she is not categorized as having the same motivations as Palestinian female suicide bombers like Wafa Idris, who was the first Palestinian woman to commit murder and suicide in Israel. Wafa's status in the community was a contributing factor for her involvement in a suicide bombing, but her intentions were neither feminist nor Western. She did not seek to emancipate women. Like many after her, Wafa was a *matriarchal conservative*, subject to her own society's definition of women's roles and honor. As we will see, in the case of the Palestinian female suicide bombers, these women are committing suicide terrorism as an act of personal and familial redemption.

Although insights into the motivations of women lay important groundwork for counter-terrorism strategy, Yoram Schweitzer studies the strategies and tactics of terrorist organizations by interviewing both male and female members. Yoram Schweitzer works for the Israeli Policy Institute for Strategic Studies, where he combines academic studies with field work. The institute provides academic work that contributes to Israel's counter-terrorism policies. Yoram Schweitzer's field work includes interviews with several failed terrorists, both male and female, and their families. During my meeting with him, Schweitzer provided little insight into the motivations of the female terrorists although he completely agreed that these women are not feminists. Instead, he focuses on the groups that employ women. According to Schweitzer, Palestinian and Islamic terrorist groups do not seek or recruit women for terrorist attacks, but if a woman seeks out a group or a member of a terrorist organization, a woman will be employed. These women are not sought after to commit attacks, but when the women seek out members of terrorist organizations they are always used as *Shahidas* (female martyrs) for a tactical advantage. In the Muslim world it is taboo for a woman to seek out a man that is unrelated to her,

so when women seek out male members of terrorist organizations they are essentially locked in to committing the attack for fear of being reprimanded by the community for mixing with a non-related man. This implies that if a woman were to put her honor in question by seeking out a man, she may have previously compromised her honor. Not only do women have to be willing to commit these attacks when they seek out terrorist male counterparts to help them, they also have to have a reason to put their honor in jeopardy. In the case of Palestinian female suicide bombers, a woman's honor must have been irreversibly damaged in order for her to put her honor in danger of being destroyed.

Yoram Schweitzer maintained that female terrorists in the Palestinian Territories are not an intended strategic plan of terrorist organizations, but are merely being employed for tactical reasons. Thus men from these groups do not seek out women nor do they allow their active membership in these groups. In essence, the implementation of women for terror attacks poses a fundamental religious obstacle for religious leaders, but women's important tactical advantage overcomes these reservations. At Israeli checkpoints, where Israeli soldiers often rely on racial profiles to identify possible terrorists (including indicators like nervous body language and identification cards), Muslim women are seldom perceived to pose a violent threat toward Israeli targets. In Israel, only recently has the situation shifted to one where women are employed by terror groups and therefore pose a more substantial threat to Israeli civilians. There is a hesitancy to search women because of their modesty and the stereotypical view of women as non-violent. The dominant Western mentality of Israeli soldiers blinded them to the possibility of female attackers and subsequently suffered for this with the death of many Israelis. The Israeli Defense Forces are renowned for their women warriors, but Israel's perception of Muslim culture did not factor in the use of Muslim women as human bombs. In response to this, female soldiers are now



posted at checkpoints for the sole purpose of searching suspicious Palestinian women. Tactically speaking, female suicide bombers have a substantial advantage in infiltrating checkpoints. Women provide low cost, low risk weapons for an organization's cause. In terrorist organizations men are trained and indoctrinated. Their training is an investment of money, effort, and resources; they are then used as leaders, soldiers, planners, and bomb makers (essentially a myriad of positions that make up any militant organization). On the other hand, desperate women have a distinct advantage as suicide bombers. Women are not given months of training, investment of weapons, or even trust. They are given minimal information about their operation, hence women are cost-effective and terrorists will often ensure success of their mission by equipping the women not only with suicide vests, but also a separate detonator in the hands of another member should she change her mind. Thus the advantage of using female bombers is undeniable. The use of women also creates a media sensation by the publication of their background stories and the brutality of the group that uses women. Indeed, female terrorists create a media stir in Israel and all over the world. When a woman blows herself up in Israel or Iraq, the media highlights the brutality of the event, acting as a monolithic advertisement for the organization that employs female terrorists. When I asked Yoram Schweitzer if he had any insight into the use of women in Iraq, considering there is very little academic work on the subject, he only alluded to the fact that these women serve as a tactical advantage to terror organizations. Yoram Schweitzer also did not agree with Raphael Israeli's assessment that these women are blowing themselves up for feminist goals.

### **Matriarchal Conservatism – An Alternative Theory**

The study of Palestinian female suicide terrorists revolve around their role in Islam. By Western standards, "[Women] are depicted as existing on the margins of society, victimized to

such as extent that it defies credibility that such individuals could continue to wage the heroic daily battle that many Arab Women in real life undertake to survive” (Sabbagh 1996, xiii).<sup>xviii</sup> These perceptions of female roles in Islam are slanted and untrue; mostly women, especially matriarchal conservatives, do not feel marginalized by their religion. Contrary to this, these women feel powerful and appreciate their status in the community as faithful, righteous Muslims. Matriarchal conservatives define their role in society from the Prophet Muhammad’s relationship with women. The lives and marriages of two of Muhammad’s wives, Khadija and Aisha, encapsulate the kinds of changes and roles that have overtaken women in Islamic Arabia. Khadija, Muhammad’s first wife, employed him to oversee her business. Khadija actually proposed to Muhammad, having been married before, when she was forty and he was twenty-five. Khadija has a central role in the story of Islam because of her importance to Muhammad. Because of her wealth, Khadija’s money freed Muhammad from the need to earn a living and enabled him to lead the life of contemplation that was the prelude to his becoming a prophet. Khadija’s support and confidence in her husband allowed him to venture out and preach Islam. Since Khadija was married to Muhammad before he received his first revelation, the custom of her economic independence, her marriage overture (apparently without a male guardian to act as intermediary) and her marriage to a man several years her junior all reflect Jahilia, or pre-Islamic period, rather than Islamic practice (Ahmed 1992, 41).<sup>xix</sup>

The control of women by male guardians and several other customs that are fixtures of Islamic marriage today are attributed to Muhammad’s marriage to Aisha, the Prophet’s favorite wife, and the subsequent wives that followed. Aisha’s position in her marriage to the Prophet was a precursor to the limitations that typify the lives of modern Muslim women. Aisha was born to Muslim parents and married Muhammad when she was nine or ten. Soon thereafter, along

with her co-wives, Aisha began to observe the new customs of veiling and seclusion. Muhammad was said to employ the veil for his wives because they were often harassed on the streets with questions for the Prophet. Consequently, Muhammad utilized the veil to protect their identities from the community, leaving Aisha, the favorite and most sought-after wife, indistinguishable from his other wives. Thus it is important to note that the use of the veil was not for abusive or manipulative purposes, but rather was imposed only on the wives of Muhammad for protective purposes, more specifically to protect the identity of Aisha (Ahmed 1992, 42).<sup>xx</sup>

Throughout Muhammad's lifetime veiling, like seclusion, was observed only by his wives. Moreover, the phrase "she took the veil" is used in the Hadith to mean that a woman became a wife of Muhammad. Even after Muhammad's death, when the material incorporated into the Hadith was circulated, veiling and seclusion were still specific to Muhammad's wives. However, during the reign of Umar (634-644) the role of women changed forever. Umar was known to brutalize women in both private and public life; he was ill-tempered with women and often physically abused his wives. Umar confined women to their homes and prevented their participation in prayers at the mosque, and even went as far as to appoint different imams for each sex (Ahmed 1992).<sup>xxi</sup> Umar's integration of different Islamic customs along with the subsequent religious leaders helped define the role of women in different parts of Arabia. Presently in most Islamist debates, women are not understood to be the passive recipients of a newly defined identity, but active participants in the new culture and society that the Islamists are intent on bringing into being from past conceptions of women's roles (Yazbeck 1996, 137).<sup>xxii</sup> Islamists have appropriated various norms and values from their heritage for which they have found precedent and justification in Islamic teaching; this assures their pupils that new

values that are propagated are grounded in the idea of true Islam (Yazbeck 1996, 139).<sup>xxiii</sup> Islamic women today generally embrace their roles as righteous Muslims and construct their own identity in terms of historical precedent in their culture as opposed to Western advances in women's socio-political movement. Muhammad's death sparked a series of rebellions in different parts of Arabia, in which Muhammad's wife, Aisha, took brief political control of Arabia. Modern Muslim feminists have collected many names of the women who fought during the time of the Prophet. One of these feminist scholars, Aliyya Mustafa Mubarak, assembled a list of 67 women who, according to her, fought in the wars of the Prophet Muhammad or in other immediate Islamic conquests. The list is comprised of women who took part in both support and lead roles in the ensuing rebellions (Cook 2005, 375).<sup>xxiv</sup>

Cases of female participation in war and as companions of the Prophet Muhammad are also found in both classical and modern accounts, such as in the works of the moralist, Abd al-Ghani b. Abd al-Wahid al Maqdisi (d. 1203) in his treatise *Manaqib al-sahabiyyat (The Merits of the Women Companions [of the Prophet Muhammad])*. The moralist describes two women from the time of the Prophet who fought in his wars. Nusayba was the daughter of the Ka'b (also known as Um Umara), and is said to have helped wounded fighters during the Battle of Uhud, subsequently sustaining 12 wounds after drawing a sword in the face of defeat. Another woman cited by al-Maqdsi was Safiya, the aunt of the Muhammad. Safiya is said to have fought in the battle of Khandaq where she took refuge in one of the strongholds of Medina, together with men and women. A group of Jews settled below the stronghold, and when one of them climbed the wall in order to penetrate the fort, Safiya cut off his head and threw it back to the people outside. Clearly, women took a role in fighting but one woman in practice set the precedent for martyrdom in Islam. Indeed, the first martyr in Islam was a woman (Cook 2005).<sup>xxv</sup> Such is

stated here on the subject of jihad in al-Bukhari's collection of the Prophet Muhammad's traditions:

The Messenger of God would enter into the house of Umm Haram daughter of Milhan, and she would feed him (Umm Haram was married to 'Ubada b. al-Samit'). So the Messenger of God went onto her, and she fed him and began to pick the lice off his head. The Messenger of God fell asleep and then woke up, laughing. She said: Why are you laughing? He said: People from my community [Muslims] were shown to me fighting in the path of God, sailing in the midst of the sea like kings on thrones. She said: O Messenger of God, pray to God that I might be one of them! And so the Messenger of God prayed for her...and she sailed the seas during the time of Mu'awiya b. Abi Sufyan [661-80], and fell from her mount when she disembarked and perished (al-Bukhari 1991).<sup>xxvi</sup>

This passage accounts for the first act of martyrdom by a woman. In accordance with the usual modern interpretation of jihad, women are not allowed to participate, but the presence of this passage sets the precedent for female participation in Islamic martyrdom (Cook 2005).<sup>xxvii</sup> The presence of women in war is not unprecedented in Muslim history. Clearly, women did take part in fighting for the Prophet Muhammad, but the importance of their role and whether they were in lead or supporting positions is still under debate. In fact, the entire use of women in terrorism is under debate in the Arab world and especially in the Palestinian Territories. When men or women from the Palestinian Territories commit terror attacks in Israel, the attacks as well as the family members of the attackers are well publicized. Families of martyrs are often willing and eager to tell the story of their child or family member who has honored themselves by becoming a martyr for the Prophet Muhammad or for a national cause. Copious amounts of

information are available that divulge the background information of Palestinian female terrorists conducive for the study and analysis. Barbara Victor, a well known international journalist, and Yoram Schweitzer, an Israeli terrorism expert, have traveled to the Palestinian Territories and Jordan where they interviewed the families of several female terrorists and some failed terrorists, thereby giving us an important glimpse into the lives and relationships of these women and their participation in suicide terror.

The motivations of Palestinian female suicide bombers relate to a type of Arab feminism I term *matriarchal conservatism*, which is prevalent in the Palestinian Territories and similar areas like Iraq. By *matriarchal conservatism* I refer to an Arab/Muslim woman's own idea of femininity, not in Western terms, but in Arab/Muslim ones. While Western feminists advocate gender equality in the division of labor, politics, and society, some Islamists believe that by presenting themselves publicly in a virtuous way, they sustain their role in society's traditional structures (Fadwa 159, 1996).<sup>xxviii</sup> Matriarchal conservatism in Islamic discourse does not portray women as diminutive and second-class members of a family unit, but rather as central figures charged with the exceedingly important task of educating their children, especially their sons. Hence, matriarchal conservatism would deem Islamic values (rather than Western ones the ultimate liberator. "Thus Islamist discourse refuses to identify the affirmation of the equality of men with women and of newly defined roles for women as having anything to do with liberation, as that term is defined in the West. Islam is seen as providing all of the rights and responsibilities appropriate for women. Islam is thus itself the liberating force that can be set in motion through the devoted adherence of both males and females" (Haddad and Smith 1996, 148).<sup>xxix</sup> In keeping with matriarchal conservatism, these women will maintain their modesty and virtue for the sake of their honor and that of their families. The responsibility to sustain modesty, honor, and virtue

is the central responsibility for matriarchs, and thus these women will suffer the consequences if their honor is questioned, and will struggle to redeem it when lost. Such consequences may lead women to redeem honor for their families and themselves by perpetrating the most virtuous act, martyrdom. In doing so, I have developed one neglected explanation for the phenomenon of female suicide bombers, which I term matriarchal conservatism. In a nutshell, I contend that Islamic female suicide bombers are using a very unconventional method (female terrorism) to achieve a very conventional (or traditional) goal – the maintenance or restoration of *female* honor as it is defined by their communities.

*Matriarchal conservatism* does not relate to the Western conception of independent and socially equal women, but rather refers to the idea that Muslim women, in response to their culture, seek honor and status in a community that prizes righteousness, modesty, motherhood, and service to the Prophet Mohammad and the males in their lives. Indeed, the basic discourse in Islam is the rejection of the West and the conviction that “freedoms” enjoyed by Western women are among the key factors in the moral and ethical disintegration of Western societies. “Western sisters” are even depicted as outside of Islamic culture, traitorous for bringing shame upon their families and communities (Haddad and Smith 1996, 138-139).<sup>xxx</sup> Matriarchs believe that these freedoms enjoyed by Western women do not liberate them, but instead subject them to the chauvinism of males in Western society (Haddad and Smith 1996).<sup>xxxi</sup> In the eyes of traditional Muslim women, their lives are not oppressive or miserable, and although Western perspectives may lead to the idea that these women are trying to rebel or change their way of life, Muslim women who become suicide bombers are probably not doing so to change the *status quo* for other women. Today political Islam has placed the issue of the roles and rights of women at the

center of its agenda. The rhetoric of Islamist teaching, speaking, and writing makes it clear that the ways in which women act, dress, and behave themselves are crucial in the reconstruction of a new and authentically Islamic society (Fadwa 1996, 159).<sup>xxxii</sup> However, there are some women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip who are trying to change the way of life for women in their community to fit a more Western construction of femininity. Women's committees were founded in the late 1970s and early 1980s and are considered the foundation of the Palestinian women's movement. The Women's Work Committee was among the first Palestinian feminist organizations in which the women of WWC produced material and design projects that are now relevant to the daily experiences and struggles of women outside urban centers. Indeed, groups like the WWC and other groups affiliated with them [i.e. the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU) which was organized in response to the first intifada, Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and the Union of Palestinian Working Women's Committee (UPWWC)] have been created to propel female initiatives in the Palestinian Territories, and yet none have committed much less involved themselves in terrorist attacks (Sharoni 1995, 65).<sup>xxxiii</sup> These groups are closer to examples of Western feminism and yet none of these organizations use terrorists or suicide bombers to promote their agenda.

The feminist movement in the Palestinian Territories is has no relationship to matriarchal conservatism. Such is also the opinion of Mira Tzoreff, a professor at Tel-Aviv University and expert in the social structure of Egyptian culture. While discussing female suicide bombers, Tzoreff contends that these women are committing suicide before they are committing acts of murder or violence. The female suicide bombers have been driven to suicide terror in order to reinstate their honor and the honor of their family in the community. For matriarchal conservatives, honor is the most important virtue of women. In one of the intifada leadership



flyers, Palestinian mothers, sisters, and daughters are described as Palestinian *manabit* – plant nurseries – or as men producing factories.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Their more honored purpose is to produce sons, but if their honor is destroyed or even in question, their status in the community is effectively ruined. Indeed, gossip (Kalaam Alnaas) قلام الناس or “what people say”- can ruin the status of a woman in the Palestinian community without actually being guilty of any offense. Barbara Victor, a journalist who has interviewed Palestinian suicide bombers, believes that “Given the importance ascribed to honor within Palestinian society, it is no surprise that such a woman might consider it an honor to die for the sake of her family” (Victor 2003, 199).<sup>xxxv</sup> In these Palestinian societies it is impossible to escape and leave your family and friends, because if you do, you are a disgrace, and the disgrace on your family is even greater (Victor 2003).<sup>xxxvi</sup> The unmarried Palestinian woman today lives under a stringent set of social and religious rules; if she is too educated she is considered abnormal, if she looks at a man to whom she is not related she risks exclusion, if she refuses to marry she is deemed out of control, if she sleeps with a man or gets pregnant, she disgraces her family and risks death at the hands of her male relatives (Victor 2003).<sup>xxxvii</sup> What follows are the stories of matriarchal conservatives who, subject to the demand of their own culture, have committed suicide and murder in an attempt to restore the honor of their families.

While accounting for the motivations of female suicide bombers, not one theorist thought that women perform suicide attacks due to foreign occupation. It begs the question; would the women in the Palestinian Territories or Iraq perform attacks if there was no occupation? The female suicide bombers of Israel and Iraq, I argue, are matriarchal conservatives. They have been shunned by their society for an often trivial oversight or opprobrious act. Women will therefore use foreign occupation as an opportunity to redeem their status, if no foreign aggressor is present

for women to assail, women may perform attacks on different enemies. The female suicide bombers have been responsible for attacking both Shiite and Sunni communities in Iraq as well as American forces. In conclusion, Palestinian women could use the Israeli occupation as an excuse to redeem honor.

### **Case Studies as Explicators**

The sundry cases of Palestinian female suicide bombers that I have collected are examples of matriarchal conservatives. These cases serve as evidence that matriarchal conservatism does exist in Palestine, however it does not contend that all instances of female terrorism are due to matriarchal conservative values. While a much larger number of cases should be collected in order to assert matriarchal conservative proneness to suicide terrorism, these samples serve to prove that if given the opportunity to redeem their honor, matriarchal conservative women may utilize suicide bombings as a tool for redemption. Therefore, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories serve as the opportunity rather than the reason for matriarchal conservatives to redeem their honor. The first female suicide bomber for Palestine was not a political activist, a feminist, nor was she a militant within Tanzim (the military of Fatah). She was a young woman who would live in infamy for being the first female suicide attacker. She became so famous that Sadaam Hussein was said to have erected a statue of her figure so all young women would follow her example. Dr. Abdul Aziz al-Rantisi, the charismatic spokesman for Hamas, even offered future female martyrs a lifetime stipend of two hundred dollars a month to the families even though four hundred dollars would go to the families of males martyrs (Victor 2003).<sup>xxxviii</sup> On the afternoon of January 27, 2002, Wafa Idris, a twenty-six year old Palestinian woman, blew herself up in a downtown Jerusalem shopping mall, killing one Israeli man and wounding 131 bystanders (Victor 2003).<sup>xxxix</sup> Wafa Idris was not involved in any

political organization nor was she known for being a Muslim extremist. On the contrary, Wafa grew up in a small house with her family and married her first cousin, Ahmad, at the age of sixteen. For any Muslim woman in a small Palestinian village, the most significant and basic role of the woman is childbearing, but in 1998 Wafa gave birth to a stillborn female infant. The entire family was devastated and her husband was humiliated. For Wafa, it was a love story, she was attracted to Ahmad for many years prior, but due to social pressure from his immediate family her husband was forced to divorce her because of her inability to fulfill her wifely duties. In fact, Ahmad later said that “at first my family blamed Wafa, and then they blamed me.” Apparently the family accused him of being unable to create an infant that would survive in Wafa’s womb (Victor 2003, 42).<sup>x1</sup> After the trauma of the stillbirth, a local doctor told Wafa and her husband, in the presence of their families, that she would never be able to carry a child to full term, effectively ruining her status and reputation in the community. Soon thereafter, Wafa Idris fell into a spiraling depression that effectively led her to abandon her duties to her husband.

Mira Tzoreff explains that throughout the Palestinian Territories and the Arab world, a woman is dependent legally and socially. In every aspect of her life, a man, either brother, father, or husband makes all the decisions. In doing so, Ahmad sought out an Imam in order to handle the situation at home. Ahmad’s Imam explained that answers to female disobedience could be found in the Koran, and that if she did not listen to her husband, by either getting out of bed, or having children, he could seek a new wife. Wafa’s husband did seek out a new wife, and in doing so, he disgraced Wafa in the community and humiliated her by sending her back to her immediate family, making her a financial burden on the family and effectively making her undesirable for wedlock because barren women are cast out as useless. After moving back in with her family, Wafa Idris found employment with the Red Crescent Moon in order to regain

purpose in her life. However, she was still rejected by the community. Wafa sought out the help of Fatah members in order to regain her status in the community and possibly escape an honor killing from the hands of a male family member. Wafa may have been coerced by her culture to perform a terror attack that would bring honor back to her family, send her to heaven, and reinstate her status as a virtuous woman. After Wafa's suicide attack in the streets of Jerusalem, a council member of Fatah eulogized, "Wafa's martyrdom restored her honor to the national role of the Palestinian woman, sketched the most wonderful pictures of heroism in the long battle for national liberation" (Victor 54). Indeed, her family's status was regained, their financial burdened relieved, and the beginning of a dangerous trend of female terrorists was born (Victor 2003).<sup>xli</sup>

Wafa Idris is an example to young Palestinian women that honor can be won in exchange for life. Several women followed in the footsteps of Wafa, including a young Palestinian woman named Zina (the pseudonym of Zina is used at the request of her family). Zina was born to a middle-class Palestinian family of 12 children. Zina had a rebellious spirit and, according to her family, had a history of problems both at school and at home. Zina refused to wear the jilbab and the hijab, the traditional covering for face and body, and had aspirations of leaving Jordan to become an international journalist far from home. At the university in Amman, Zina studied English until she became proficient, and eventually got a job at an American television network, where she trained as an intern. Zina's life took an unfortunate turn when she refused to marry a man her parents had chosen. Zina was absolutely against an arranged marriage, especially because she was in love with someone else. Zina had a secret relationship for several months until one of her brothers discovered her relationship after following her to class. After a family discussion, it was decided that Zina could no longer be trusted to go anywhere on her own. Her

father refused to allow her to continue her studies and instructed his wife to keep their daughter locked in her room until he consulted with the Imam about her future. Unfortunately, Zina later discovered she was pregnant. Terrified that her father and brother would kill her if they found out, she decided to keep her condition a secret for as long as possible before a planned escape to Egypt with the father of her baby. It took several months for her condition to show and when it did she was savagely beaten into revealing the father. Zina's boyfriend was so scared for his life that he escaped to Cairo. Zina was allowed to have the child but she would have to remain in her father's home and give it up to one of her married family members. Zina considered herself lucky because most women in her condition would have been subject to an honor killing, considering there was no way to find the father of the child (Victor 2003).<sup>xlii</sup>

Zina's life was unbearable, and because she had a cousin in Tanzim, she was approached in May 2001 and told that the only way to redeem herself and her family was to leave Amman for Ramallah, on the condition that she prepares herself for an eventual military mission that would take her life in the name of liberating Palestine. Only after she completed the mission would she be exonerated from her sins, and if she were still alive, allowed to live a life free from admonishment. Zina went through trainings and was prepared for several missions... but, in the process, fell in love with her handler, Hassan, the man responsible for her recruitment and terrorist activities. During their affair, Zina was supposed to carry out an attack and only afterward would Hassan decide to marry her. On July 25, 2002, Zina was given her first real mission. She was to carry a bomb, concealed in a beer can, across the checkpoint from Ramallah to Jerusalem. However, the bomb was not powerful enough to kill anybody and Zina made her escape from Jerusalem. According to Zina, she barely saw Hassan the following days after the attack, eventually discovering that Hassan had a wife and three children in Nablus. This did not

deter Zina's participation in terrorist activities. On August 9, 2001 she was responsible for transporting the infamous suicide bomber to the Sbarro Pizza Restaurant, which took the lives of 15 people and injured more than 130. Weeks later, she was caught and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison for her part in the Sbarro's bombing, convicted as an accomplice in the deaths and injuries of all the victims. Zina's support role for Tanzim never exonerated her sins in the community; she was caught for terrorist activities before she was able to regain her status by becoming a Palestinian suicide bomber (Victor 2003).<sup>xliii</sup>

Although Zina was considered a rebellious fixture in her community, not all Palestinian female terrorists were considered tainted or insubordinate because of personal choices. Such is the case of Darine Abu Aisha, an obedient daughter and another academic achiever. In December 2001, she entered a literary contest, in which Darine quotes from the Koran:

All men and women are equal, individuals should not be judged according to gender, beauty, wealth, or privilege. The only thing that makes one person better than another is his or her character. I am a Muslim woman who believes her body belongs to her alone, which means that how I look should not play a role in who I am or what response I evoke from people who meet me. Wearing the hijab gives me freedom, because my physical appearance is not an issue (Victor 2003, 106).<sup>xliv</sup>

Darine was the youngest of seven children and was twenty years old when she died. She was an intelligent student at Al-Najah University in Nablus. Samira, a cousin of hers, claims that there were many suitors who came to ask for Darine's hand in marriage because she was considered very beautiful. Darine was believed to be a leader, someone who was not easily influenced by others and who stood up for what she believed in regardless of what her peers

thought. Although her family was pleased with her academic achievements at the university, she was still unmarried and had no intention of marrying in the future. Darine knew that as a Palestinian woman her fate was sealed, an arranged marriage with six or seven children, and a husband who probably would not have the same intellectual curiosity as she did. What pushed Darine over the edge is subject to debate, but according to Nabila (Darine's mother) Darine was severely dishonored while standing in line at a checkpoint to get into Israel. As a mischievous joke, a soldier forced a male companion of Darine, Rashid, to kiss her in return for allowing them and a screaming baby through the checkpoint. At first Darine refused but later consented on behalf of the sick child waiting to get across the line. Before Darine could act, the soldier ripped the hijab off Darine's head. Nabila knew that the chances of her daughter getting married were hurt, she thus arranged with the family of Rashid to marry Darine. Darine was horrified with this idea, but Rashid promised Darine to help her find another solution so that her family would not be disgraced. Darine then decided to become a Palestinian suicide bomber. Darine detonated herself at the Maccabim checkpoint near Jerusalem, thereby injuring several Israeli soldiers. Once again, a Palestinian woman committed an act of suicide terror in order to regain her status (Victor 2003).<sup>xlv</sup>

Although many of the women who became terrorists were subjected to the social humiliation and taboos of their society for being dishonored, the situation of Ayat Al-Akras seemed to have been different. Ayat grew up in Dehaishe camp near Bethlehem with her parents Khadra and Mohammed. Ayat's father worked as a supervisor with an Israeli construction firm in the settlement of Betar Ilit. The story of the family is filled with tragedies. Samir, the oldest child, was jailed twice for throwing stones at Israeli soldiers. Another son, Fathi, was injured by Israeli bullets and one daughter suffered a miscarriage. The status of the family was damaged

within the community, especially since Mohammad worked for an Israeli company that expanded home sites within the territories. Ayat had a lot of success in school and at the age of 15 became engaged to Shadi Abu Laban, her first cousin and her first choice for marriage. Ayat's ambition was to work as a correspondent for an Arab newspaper in the West Bank. However, according to Shadi, Ayat was always embarrassed and ashamed that her father worked for an Israeli company, believing that working for the Jews was wrong. Eventually, whispers and gossip began in the Dehaishe refugee camp and in a community where status and honor are worth one's life. The gossip referred to Mohammad's relationship with the Israelis and escalated into a story about a man who was a traitor, a collaborator who had sold out his people in return for a comfortable life. Ayat may have believed that the only way to salvage the reputation of her family and avoid death at the hands of an angry mob was to commit to a martyrs' death. On Friday, March 29, 2002, only months before her wedding, Ayat detonated herself at a Jerusalem supermarket. Ayat seemed to have everything going for her, why would she commit suicide and murder? There is no evidence of coercion or personal disgrace or perhaps we do not know the entire story considering that her family is the only source regarding her intentions (Victor 2003).<sup>xlvi</sup> In the documentary, *To Die in Jerusalem*, the producers juxtapose the lives of the attacker, Ayat Akras, and one of her victims, Rachel Levy. Interviews with Ayat's parents resemble more nationalist propaganda than conversations with bereaved parents, and do not mention Mr. Akras's work with the Israeli government, but do show him polishing the new Audi he purchased (most likely after the death of his daughter). Indeed, cash awards are routinely paid to the families of martyrs.

Although useful information can be gleaned from interviews with those closest to suicide attackers, interviews with women caught in the act of terror have been conducted in order to



reveal motivations. Shireen Rabiya was a tall, slim, beautiful girl living in the Palestinian territories. In any other culture, Shireen would have been considered model material, but Shireen lived in a society where she was teased for being too beautiful and therefore harassed by suspicious gossip. Subsequently, she left high school because of the harassment. Shireen's uncle recruited her for a terrorist operation because of this gossip and because she was the only one in her family without a husband. Shireen never succeeded in her attack and was subsequently placed in prison. Shireen was sought out because she was considered an outcast in her society, not as a result of sexual promiscuity or betrayal, but simply because she was thought to be beautiful and lonely (Victor 2003).<sup>xlvii</sup>

Yoram Schweitzer has also performed interviews with failed suicide terrorists, which is possibly the most compelling way to extract the true motivations of Palestinian female terrorists. Thouria Khamour was born in 1976 and lived in Jba in the Jenin area. She was arrested on May 19, 2002, one day before she planned on carrying out a suicide attack in Jerusalem. She was arrested at home, before embarking on the mission she had volunteered for two weeks previously. Yoram Schweitzer interviewed her several times, and in these interviews she gave several different versions of her motivations and the ways she was recruited for her mission. As time went on, and as Thouria became more indoctrinated into the prison system's culture of Islamic extremism and political activism, she recast herself from a girl with personal motives to a Palestinian and Islamic nationalist struggling against the Zionist entity. However, during the first interview, Thouria claimed she volunteered for the terror attack because she was subject to great personal pressure and mental distress, and according to Schweitzer, this is the most valid reasoning she gave behind her attacks. Thouria said her family rejected the man she wanted to marry and this caused her great pain. Thouria claims that when she was seventeen she was

rebuked by her family for tomboyish way of dressing and was warned that she would not find a husband. Thouria was a mediocre student and only stayed in school until tenth grade. She changed jobs several times and, due to her unstable way of life, her family kept close watch on her in order to prevent her from further dishonoring the family. When Thouria finally found a prospective groom, a man who was disabled, her family strongly opposed the marriage because of the price that the groom's family would have to pay to her father. As a result, she met with a man she knew to be a recruiter of suicide terrorists and began an uninterrupted process toward a suicide attack until she was eventually arrested by Israeli police (Schweitzer 2006).<sup>xlvi</sup> Although this woman may not have been completely marginalized in society in the typical sense, she did feel like she had no other options for escaping her role in society. Shame and humiliation may lead to suicide terrorism, but so can feelings of hopelessness.

All of these women have been marginalized in their community in some irreversible way, mostly for relationships with male companions. However, Arin Ahmad was a twenty year old unattached resident of Beit Sakhour when she decided to carry out a suicide attack in Rishon LeZion in 2002. Arin was supposed to be involved in a double suicide attack, but she rescinded her cooperation at the last minute for moral reasons. Arin claimed that she was depressed and hopeless because her boyfriend was killed by Israeli soldiers and therefore wanted to avenge his death. It is possible that if she was sexually active with the man she intended on marrying, she might have been shunned in her community for not being a virgin after his death. However, when Arin joined Tanzim she assumed that the process of committing a suicide attack would take a long time, but when Tanzim planned on sending her for an attack within days of her commitment to the group, she regretted that Tanzim took advantage of her emotionally fragile situation and backed out of the attack. Arin is a rare breed of suicide terrorist, having backed out

of the mission for moral reasons; however she is now in Israeli prisons for her activities with Tanzim and intent to commit a terrorist attack (Schweitzer 2006).<sup>xlix</sup>

Wafa al-Bas was another marginalized woman who intended to commit a terrorist attack. Wafa was taking advantage of a medical appointment at the Soroka Medical Center in Beersheva when she decided to commit her attack. Wafa was due for a check-up after being badly scarred on her face and all over her body when a heater in the family's home exploded. Not coincidentally, Wafa's scars severely hindered her chances of marriage. On the morning of June 20, 2005, Wafa al-Bas, aged 21, a resident of the Jabalya refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip, came to the Erez road block with ten kilograms of explosives hidden in her underclothes. When Wafa felt that she had alerted the Israeli soldiers at the checkpoint, she tried several times to activate her belt. When the belt would not detonate she was captured and taken to an Israeli prison where she was interviewed by Yoram Schweitzer. In the beginning, Wafa claimed she was under deep emotional stress because of her scars and was tricked into committing an attack. Later, after possibly being indoctrinated in prison, she claimed that, as a small child, she had always wanted to die for Allah. Wafa also went as far as to say again that explosives were secretly planted on her while she was under the influence of drugs in a Palestinian hospital. The parents of Wafa al-Bas attributed her deed to her fear that she would be a financial burden on the family and that her death would eventually bring financial compensation to her family from Fatah (Schweitzer 2006).<sup>1</sup>

Reem Al-Reyashi was affiliated with a terrorist organization before she carried out a suicide attack at a border crossing in Jerusalem, Israel. She was the mother of two small children and was married to a Hamas operative. Gossip circulated within the community that she had committed infidelity with another man, either before or during her marriage to her current

husband. After her death, Reem's parents refused to discuss her martyrdom with reporters and they did not arrange a mourning tent for her, a rarity for proud parents of a righteous Muslim. Reem's husband was said to have persuaded her to commit this attack in order for her to atone for her disgrace. In doing so, her children's honor would be restored and she would be accepted into paradise (The Washington Times 2004).<sup>li</sup>

Only recently have suicide bombings subsided in Israel. The decreases in attacks have been attributed to the peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian people which include a cease fire between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian terrorist operatives. In doing so, the number of female suicide bombers have decreased significantly. However, if the tensions between Israelis and Palestinians escalate and the Palestinians decide to reinitiate their suicide attacks against Israeli civilians, female suicide bombers will certainly be employed. If given the opportunity, matriarchal conservatives will perpetrate suicide attacks in order to redeem their honor in society and terrorist groups will provide these women with the tools necessary to do so. The evidence provided does not indicate any participation or involvement in feminist activities within the Palestinian Territories. On the contrary, these women have suffered a loss of honor and have attempted to redeem it from society when lost. Most of these women were unmarried, not educated beyond high school, and were rarely directly affiliated with a terrorist organization. Indeed, the evidence suggests that these women seek out terrorist operatives only to provide the equipment necessary to perform attacks. Some have been accused of committing adultery while others have irrevocably damaged their status by getting pregnant out of wedlock. The underlying dynamic of matriarchal conservatives who commit suicide attacks is their *employment of non-traditional methods to attain traditional aims*. How ironic is it that if matriarchal conservatives lose honor in their communities they will deviate from the conventional views of femininity and

humanity in their culture by committing suicide attacks in order to regain status in the very same society that has rejected them.

Matriarchal Conservatives Data Set

Matriarchs	Marital Status	Education	Terrorist Group Affiliation	Feminist Group Affiliation	Personal Honor Status
Wafa Idris	Divorced	High School	None	None	Dishonored
Zina	Unmarried	High School	Tanzim	None	Dishonored
Darine Abu Aisha	Engaged	University	None	None	Dishonored
Ayat Al-Akras	Unmarried	High School	None	None	Inconclusive
Shireen Rabiya	None	Unfinished	None	None	Inconclusive
Reem Al-Reyashi	Married		Hamas	None	Dishonored
Thouria Khamour	Unmarried	Unfinished	None	None	Dishonored
Arin Ahmad	Unmarried		Tanzim	None	Dishonored
Wafa Al-Bas	Unmarried		Fatah	None	Dishonored

Above is a sample of Palestinian women who have committed or attempted to commit terror attacks in Israel. Although there are two instances where it is inconclusive whether or not these women have been dishonored in society, none of these women were affiliated with any terror organization nor were these women feminists. What this sample proposes is that matriarchal conservatism does exist among past female suicide bombers. Moreover, this preliminary research

should be considered the initial stages of future research that should be conducted in order to reveal matriarchal conservatism in Israel and possibly Iraq. Although it is possible that the motivations of Palestinian women that drive them to suicide terror in Palestine is not mono-causal, a sample that encompasses every attempted and successful female suicide bomber for Palestine will determine those theories. However, given the sampling of this data, culture and honor is undoubtedly an important factor that drives women to engage in terror.

Women are important to the understanding of terrorism, but they are still under-studied due to their low numbers of participation compared to males. These Palestinian women are not leaders in the organizations nor are they planners. These women are not a part of the military wing of Fatah's Tanzim, nor are they a member of Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, or Islamic Jihad. Their presence in terrorism is creating an advantageous alternative for terror organizations to threaten and attack their enemy; instead of using highly trained soldiers they can use women. The negative effect of appearing brutish and desperate that terror groups create by using women as suicide bombers is outweighed by the media sensation they cause. The participation of these women is based on their status in their communities.

### **Honor Killings (An Alternative Explanation)**

Being outcast from a society may not persuade some women to commit suicide and murder, but when faced with being murdered at the hands of a male family member or committing suicide, some women choose the latter. Beauty, promiscuity, or even education can lead to death from an honor killing. Honor killings are common in hidden fixtures of fundamentalist Islamic communities; they are also overlooked as motivating factors for female terrorists. The target of an honor killing faces death at the hands of a male relative unless she

redeems her honor, perhaps by committing to a martyrs' death. However, a Palestinian women does not have to commit suicide in the name of Islam; she could also regain her honor by being caught trying to perpetrate a suicide attack. Some of the women interviewed by Yoram Schweitzer were caught while attempting to commit a terrorist attack. Although they are sent to prison, their family's honor was restored and a small sum of money is still given to the immediate family. "Immediately after the bombing of Wafa Idris, Wafa's sister-in-law, Wissim, spoke up in a televised statement, saying that Wafa had often told her that it was better to die a martyr's death than to live in humiliation" (Victor 2003, 27).<sup>lii</sup> According to Barbara Victor, all the women she studied (who actually died) had personal problems that made their lives untenable within their own culture and society. To Naomi Chazan, an Israeli psychologist, the threat of death as moral justification is not hollow. The concept of honor is so embedded in Arab culture that honor killings still occur. Chazan implores people not to overlook the severity of honor killings. "Don't make the mistake to assume that honor killings happen only in Gaza or Jenin or in Saudi Arabia, I deal with so many young Arab-Israeli women who fear for their lives at the hands of their fathers and brothers" (Victor 193). Thus if a woman has no way to escape her destiny she can justify taking the lives of others. Walter Reich even claims that people do not ordinarily engage in reprehensible conduct until they have justified to themselves the morality of their actions (Reich 1990, 16).<sup>liii</sup>

Every year, it is likely that hundreds of women and girls are murdered in the Middle East by family members. Legitimacy for such murders stems from a complex code of honor ingrained in the consciousness of men and women in Islamic society. Family status is largely dependent upon its honor, much of which is determined by the respectability of the female members, who can irreparably damage the status of the family with the perceived misuse of their sexuality.

Manal Kleibo Zarf, a female attorney, knows of many honor killings, although she has never been asked to prosecute one case. Zarf believes that this is because Jordanian Law still applies to the West Bank, Article 341 considers murder a legitimate act of defense when “The act of killing another or harming another is committed as an act in defense of his life, or his honor or somebody else’s life or honor” (Ruggi 1998, 12).<sup>liv</sup> Honor killings still remain a private family matter- no official statistics are available on the practice or its frequency. According to a November 1997 report of the Woman’s Empowerment Project published in *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida*, there were 20 honor killings in Gaza and the West Bank in 1996. One representative of the group even added that “We know there are more but no one publicizes it.” The Palestinian Working Society states that in 1998 more than 40 women have been killed for honor in Gaza (Ruggi 1998).<sup>lv</sup> Honor killings are a motivating factor for women to commit suicide bombings, when given the choice between death at your hand or death at the hands of a family member, some women may choose the latter. This choice, however, should be stressed. Women are subject to the social cleavages of their religion and community, although they may be inadvertently pressured to perform attacks, these women still make the choice not only to take their own lives, but rather to take their lives as well as the lives of innocent civilians.

### **Female Terrorism in Iraq**

Recent statistics are hard to attain in societies where honor killings are considered a closed family matter. However, what are the other implications of honor killings in other Muslim societies like Iraq? Honor killings in Iraq are also a common occurrence. In 2007, a 17-year-old girl whose religion was Yazidi, a Kurdish religion with origins in Islam and Christianity, was dragged into a crowd in a headlock with police looking on. Family members were responsible for beating her and then stoning her to death. The Yazidis still observe an ancient Middle Eastern



tradition in which mixing with people from other faiths are condemned. Authorities believe that she was killed for being seen with a Sunni Muslim man (Tawfeeq and Todd 2007).<sup>lvi</sup>

In 2008 alone, more than 30 female suicide bombers have detonated themselves in Iraq (Tawfeeq 2008).<sup>lvii</sup> Rania Ibrahim, a 20 year-old woman from the province of Diyala in Iraq was the first attempted suicide bomber. She attributed her attempt at suicide and murder to her forced marriage to a man 10 years her senior after both her father and brother died. Rania's status in society was destroyed when she lost her male guardians and was thus forced to marry an extremist who coerced her into participating in a bombing (Iraq Updates 2008).<sup>lviii</sup> The most recent incident of another suicide bombing was in central Baquba on October 8 2008, killing nine people and wounding more than seventeen. An official said the woman, covered in a traditional black garment known as an abaya, blew herself up near a security checkpoint outside the courthouse. In July of 2008, 3 female bombers struck Kurdish political protesters in Kirkuk and Shiite pilgrims in Baghdad, killing at least 48 people and leaving 249 wounded in one of the bloodiest sequences of attacks in Iraq. In the attacks in Baghdad, three women used suicide vests and a bomb in a bag to make strikes just minutes apart, killing 24 people instantly, all apparently Shiite pilgrims marching in a festival, according to an official at the Interior Ministry (Oppel and Tavernise 2008).<sup>lix</sup> Wenza Ali Mutlaq, who was in her 30s and whose attack was captured on a security video, was the 18th female suicide bomber to strike in the Diyala Province, which has been hit by female attackers much more frequently than any other province of Iraq. So far, 11 of the 20 suicide bombings carried out by women in Iraq this year have occurred in Diyala (Rubin 2008).<sup>lx</sup> In February 2008 two women were used as suicide bombers in an Iraqi pet market. The two women had Down's syndrome and were detonated from a distance, killing 91 people (Fletcher 2008).<sup>lxi</sup> The family histories of these women are unknown because of the reclusive

nature of the communities from which they come. However, these women may have been dishonored in their communities. In the case of the two handicapped women, their status in the community was clearly not respected as they were used as human bombs, detonated from a cell phone by Al-Qaeda members. A psychiatrist, Ahmed Bekka, told Aswat al-Iraq that al-Qaeda Organization's emirs (leaders) used to give some girls hallucinatory pills to guarantee their bombing operations would be successful, especially if the women were mentally handicapped (Iraq Updates 2008).<sup>lxii</sup>

Suicide attacks in Israel are intensely publicized by the Israeli government and are hailed within the Palestinian communities as acts of honor. Thus it is much simpler to study the life stories of the women who commit attacks against Israelis. Such is not the case for the women in Iraq. The number of female suicide bomber in Iraq has kept growing over the last few years and yet very little is known about the motivations of these women, their group affiliations, or even their names. It is more difficult to come to any major conclusion about the details of these attacks, so insights are pure conjecture. Because these women are considered "occupied" in the American media, there is an assumption they are fighting for liberation from Americans. There is no evidence to support that these women are hyper-nationalists, nor is there any support for the reasoning that these women are killing American forces in order to gain gender equality ( i.e., in some cases these women are attacking fellow Iraqis). Moreover, the women in Iraq who have committed suicide attacks, most of whom are from the religious Diyala Province, are most likely matriarchal conservatives, in that they would more likely pride Islamic righteousness over Western values like equality. Thus, why are these women committing suicide attacks instead of being employed as support roles to terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda? During the Algerian Revolution in the 1960s, women were in support roles, often being responsible for transporting

weaponry and bombs to different locations. On several occasions, women were used to leave bombs in areas frequented by the French, like beaches or cafes. In the case of Iraq, however, women are not in support roles. On February 3, 2009 a woman was arrested for recruiting perhaps dozens of women for suicide bombing missions. The matriarch known as Umm al-Mumineen was a part of a ploy in which she would seek out troubled women and persuade them to commit suicide missions in order to regain their honor. There is also evidence that terrorists, working in conjunction with this woman, would target young women in conservative homes and rape them in order to ruin their status within the community. The young girls would be sent to Umm al-Mumineen for matronly advice where they would then be instructed on how to commit a suicide bombing in order to redeem their honor. Whereas the women in the Palestinian Territories were sporadically used as suicide bombers, the terrorists in Iraq may be exploiting the honor system of Islam in order to make young women suicide terrorists (BBC News).<sup>lxiii</sup>

## Conclusion

The female suicide bombers in Iraq are subject to the same *status quo* as the Palestinian female suicide bombers in Israel. Honor is still prized above all else, women are subject to the deadly threat of gossip and the idea that they can sacrifice their life in order to regain status for themselves and their families. Interviews with the family members of these women or with the male operatives who supplied these women with explosives are needed to prove these theories. Putting aside Western normative opinions of Islamic honor, how does the United States thwart the use of female suicide bombers in Iraq? The aim of this research was that, by analyzing and understanding the motivations of these women, proper actions can be taken to keep these women from performing terror attacks. Women have tactical advantages for committing suicide attacks, like hiding a bomb under a hijab or abaya, the look of innocence to get through a checkpoint, and

their inherent newsworthiness. If the American army created new policies by borrowing some of Israel's tactics to thwart female terrorism, female suicide bombings might be reduced. A simple initiative like employing female soldiers at checkpoints can deter female terrorists, or American forces can support welfare and workers programs outside their original community specifically for women. If you take these women away from the threat of an honor killing if humiliated, and give them the opportunity to be self-sustaining, these women may not feel forced into becoming terrorists. Indeed, an Iraqi psychiatrist who is familiar with the story of Rania Ibrahim, a female bomber in Iraq, says that "One of the things that could be done [to deter suicide attacks by women] is to trim the volume of women's unemployment and provide varied jobs for them based on their education and qualifications (Iraq Updates 2008).<sup>lxiv</sup>

In the Bamian province of Afghanistan, war has left women particularly vulnerable. For years the women in the Bamian province have been the victims of rape and abduction. Hundreds of thousands have been left as widows, mired in a desperate poverty, made worse under Taliban rule because they were not allowed to work or leave home unaccompanied by male relatives.<sup>lxv</sup> Now women are driving cars, working in public offices and police stations, and sitting on local councils. Most of the people in this province are ethnic Hazaras, Shiite Muslims who were opposed to women working outside the home but due to the desperate need of labor, women have taken on new roles in society. Women are taking jobs as police officers and are seen taking driving lessons, proving it is possible to give opportunities to the women in Iraq. If women are given opportunities elsewhere they may not feel trapped to redeem their honor by becoming suicide bombers. Giving these women jobs may irritate the community initially, but like the village in Afghanistan, the men will adapt to the new situation due to the overwhelming need for labor and income. Thus, if American forces supplied the women in Iraq with labor or refugee

programs outside their villages, women may not have to resort to suicide terror. In fact, it had been found that the higher percentage of women in a country's labor force, the fewer the number of Islamist terror attacks (Robison et al. 2006).<sup>lxvi</sup> In essence, the women who lose honor in their community, if given the opportunity to leave, may choose welfare programs over suicide.

Matriarchal Conservatism is a paradigm within Islamic culture. These Muslim women choose to commit suicide and murder, a fundamental sin in Islam, in order to redeem honor in the very religious communities in which they live. The American perception has often resembled the idea that "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned," where women commit attacks for nationalism, anger, or perhaps equality, whereas the opposite is true. Matriarchal conservatives prize their honor and therefore suffer from its fragile nature. As a result, terrorist organizations recognize this opportunity and will refine their use of female bombers if given the opportunity. Therefore, if matriarchal conservatives are susceptible to the plotting of male-dominated terrorist organizations, counter-terrorism policy needs to also focus on women. We cannot assume that matriarchal conservative women want to live as Americans, with the same cultural norms such as equality and social freedom. Matriarchal conservatives prize their traditional role in society and are not demoralized by fitting into its complex structure. The presence of female suicide bombers in martial environments challenges our ill-conceived notions of Arab feminists. Often we perceive Arab women as submissive participants in domestic and social life, the existence of matriarchal conservatives, however, changes these conceptions of female involvement in warfare and by extension, challenges the roles of Arab women in feminism and warfare.

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